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ABSTRACT

This presentation examines the history of women teachers in the rural United States. The earliest classrooms in America were a male environment modeled after European schools. But in the mid-19th century, the Civil War and westward expansion depleted the number of male teachers and brought rural women teachers to the helm of American education. Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, and Catherine Beecher established training programs and served as role models for the first trained women teachers. Mass recruitments of teachers were responsible for placing women teachers in Western frontier schools, southern schools for freed slaves, and missionary schools for American Indians. Women answered these calls, drawn by the promise of adventure, economic stability, independence, marriage opportunities, or the chance to do God's work. Immigrant mothers established schools for their children on the frontier and thereby maintained their language and culture. The demand for teachers continued in the late 1800s as legislation in many states required a school within 4 miles walking distance of every student. In the late 1880s, 90 percent of rural teaching positions were held by women. In the early 1900s, girls outnumbered boys in rural schools as boys were needed on the farm or were otherwise encouraged to work. Many women teachers were dismissed during the depression of the 1930s but were rehired during World War II. Anecdotes about specific rural women teachers are included. (SV)

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Rural Women Teachers in the United States

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Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to talk about a subject that is near and dear to my heart, mainly rural women teachers and their history and life accomplishments. I'm a bit like a grandparent when someone asks me anything about the subject. I drag out pictures and provide endless anecdotes. This morning I would like to do both, hopefully without boring you spitless in the process.

As this conference chooses to begin on a note of reflection, "Looking Back: Voices and Reflections," the title of the first session today, and is about rural matters and issues, I cannot think of a more enlivened set of voices to begin with than women in small one-, two-, and three-room schools across the United States.

While educational history books documented rosters of student names and dates and places and schoolhouses and school boards, rural women teachers took the time to write down a very different history. Ironically, it is the type of story we are so longing to hear once again. A history of people, place and community. The social histories that women teachers recorded describe their day-to-day experiences in rural schools with depth and dimension. I believe we have a great deal to learn from these women by looking into their lives and work, and I would like to invite you to join me in meeting them, both verbally and visually.

The historical experiences of America's rural teachers provide fertile ground for learning about networking and developing community and even coping with stress. I will use information from diaries, journals, slides, and photographs to show how America's rural women made a difference in education through the autonomy of having a room of their own, the one-room schoolhouse. Rural women teachers arrived at the helm of America's education movement through unusual circumstances, wars, economic and agricultural depressions, and westward expansions. It was truly a male environment in the earliest classrooms in America, modelled after the Europeans where schoolmasters and school misters ruled in the classroom. Women teachers had their ability to lead tested time and time again. Yet, they rose to the occasion by developing coping strategies that strengthened not only their common drive to provide a solid education for America's youth, but built some of the strongest networks of the time that bound women teachers together as a powerful education cadre.

The first real woman teacher was a school mother. According to the Oxford English dictionary, the term originated in the United States and has a number of grammatical uses. "Schoolmarm" means to guide or instruct in a patronizing manner. Town records kept before the American revolutionary war document widowed or single unmarried women accepting a few pence per week for instructing children in their homes.

In the late 1600's, Widow Penchin's life was not an easy one. She sold gingerbread and cake from her cottage and displayed a sign in her window announcing "School kept here." For Widow Penchin, a number of jobs were required to help her make a living. Taking in scholars, as the children were called in her school, was only one such occupation. By the middle of the 19th century, several women had stepped forward to become leaders, if not legends, in the first educational movement encompassing rural women teachers. Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, and Katherine Beecher served as role models for the first trained rural women teachers. All three women devoted their lives to teaching and advancing higher educational opportunities for everyone, including children and women in their schools. Emma Willard wanted to make advanced classes available to young girls and write textbooks during a time of censorship of women's access to educational materials. Women, it was thought, should not be interested in any subjects as deep or exhilarating as geography, algebra, or politics. She established the Troy Female Seminary for the training of women teachers, which eventually graduated some 12,000 women teachers during a span of 50 years. Mary Lyon fostered an equal blending of religious training with education. She taught under these circumstances and provided just the right opportunity for her students. Women felt their calling to work spreading their religious and moral beliefs to an uneducated and ignorant population. The graduates of Mary Lyon's Mount Holiok Seminary teacher training program stepped into frontier classrooms, carrying a stack of schoolbooks in one arm and a bible under the other. Catherine Beecher provided a formidable role model for the schoolmarm image. Trained at Beecher's Hartford Seminary, (she) recruited young women headed west and served in rural schools. These trainees were advised to establish strict disciplinarian techniques, particularly in the use of the rod for punishment. The girls from Miss Beecher's school also signed a note promising not to marry for at least the first 2 years of their teaching contracts. Harriet Bishop received her first proposal not long after her arrival in St. Paul, Minnesota. A gentleman by the name of Ozzie Owl, she wrote, "has offered me the best corner of his lodge and help from another squaw to handle the chores, and even hush my papoose. I refused his marriage proposal and the next

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thing I knew Ozzie Owl begged money to buy a new shirt and left."

Following the great land settlements and westward movements of the 1860's the first mass training periods for rural women teachers began. Men left rural classrooms for the settling of the west or to fight in the civil war, thus creating a large demand for women. While mass recruitments of teachers were responsible for placing women in rural schools, perhaps it is important to ask why women would have wanted to go to the wilderness to teach, especially since motivation for women to take a teaching job in the 1840-1860's continued to be interpreted through their preparatory role for motherhood and marriage. The answers are quite varied. Many young women saw themselves going out to civilize the west and were drawn to the opportunity to do God's work. Others began reading dime novels about adventurous women and they wanted to leave as well. Woolen mill closings on the Eastern seaboard in the 1860's left many young women without jobs and school teaching provided a means of gaining respectable white collar work. Others saw the opportunity for adventure, economic stability, marriage opportunities and even work independence, such as Mrs. Lucia Darling, the first school teacher in Montana. One of the earliest recruitments of women teachers was the union missions recruitment under the auspices of the United Foreign Missionary Association, which sent its first group of women teachers to Oklahoma to teach the O'Sage Indians. Western communities also advertised for schools in Eastern newspapers and women were enthusiastically recruited to rural areas to start schools, although a community's enthusiasm might not have been matched by its finances.

This is the ship that women went on when Asa Mercer put an ad in the Boston Globe. He recruited a whole bunch of young women, something like 20 or 30, and they went on a ship through the Panama Canal, around South America and all the way up to Seattle, and when they got there, they didn't realize that there were no jobs for them. He had just simply put an ad in the paper and recruited all these good looking young women to get on the ship with him. They nearly threw him overboard.

"The floors and walls were just plain dirt," wrote Katherine Wiggins in Kansas in 1888, "not even adobe plaster, not one window, and a cellar type door way giving scant illumination." "This is my school," she wrote, "plain benches without backs run across three sides of the room and there is no blackboard or any other equipment." Getting paid was frequently a problem as well, and teachers wrote in their personal journals about having to plead for their money or wait until the school board saw fit to sign their pay checks. Some teachers were even paid with bartered goods. A few chickens, a cord of wood, or exchanges of laundry or ironing. "I was paid $75.00 a month," wrote Cybil Sutherland in 1935, "what was funny at that time was you could never quite get it. They paid you in script, so I'd have to borrow from the bank to tide me over. Sometimes during my pay month the money would come in so I could pay off my bank note. I was really getting less than $75.00 by the time you figured it all out. But it went just as far as what I was making in the end. I paid $20.00 a month board. I paid $20.00 a month car payment. My gasoline was cheap at that time because it was about 12 cents a gallon, so the rest of it was mine to gloriously spend on beauty shop appointments or whatever my little heart desired. My clothes never looked better than they did then. Classroom supplies were often limited. Perhaps a few sheets of writing paper, one pen for a whole room of children, a single slate board or a book brought from home."

Teachers even wrote about having to supply materials for their students out of their own money. Yet thousands of women fill the rosters of northern teachers who signed up to teach freed blacks beginning in 1861 with America's civil war. Beleaguered by swamp snakes, malaria, and fleas; and harassed by the Ku Klux Klan, these northern women teachers numbered nearly 2000.

This is Ida Wells Barnett who actually started out as a school teacher. She rode six miles on a white mule each way to teach school and she did that every day and rode home at night to take care of her four brothers and sisters because her parents had died in a flu epidemic. She taught for about five years and then after that she went on to become a very famous journalist in Washington, DC.

Teachers sent by the American Missionary Association had to possess six characteristics. Missionary spirit, good health, energy, culture and common sense, healthy personal habits, and experience with discipline procedures. Many a rural woman teacher risked being imprisoned for teaching in secret or moonlight schools. These were the first areas of adult literacy and adult education that we see coming from Texas, Kentucky and down south.

Another group of rural women teachers frequently missed in history books were the immigrant mothers who started schools for young children on the plains during the era of America's early land settlements. Seen as a way of maintaining ethnic identity, immigrant schools were established in homes and church basements. Some of the women had teaching experiences before coming to America and many women taught in their native languages. Educating children and settling into a new country went hand in hand. Yet, neither was a simple undertaking, as noted by G. Svensson, whose father had been a teacher in Norway. She wrote in 1875, "the training of children is not an easy task, we are not all able to carry on as we should. When I think of our heavy responsibilities laid upon us, I often become sad and think it best to do as Olly (my husband) once advised me. He said we should rear the children to the best of our understanding and ability, and then leave the rest to him, who said, for of such is the kingdom of heaven."

G. Svensson has one of the most poignant diaries that I have ever read. It's held at the Iowa State Historical Society and in the end I was saddened to read that after having 10 children in 12 years she died giving birth to her last child when she was only 32 years old. Teaching native American children or children of immigrants was another aspect of the rural teacher's daily routine. U. Borne, named Arizona Press Woman of the Year in 1972, taught in the Arizona desert for nearly 30 years and explained her attempts to teach and her efforts to work for children. She remembered her vocation and avocation affectionately as a lifetime spent with kids and cows.

For teachers, bi-lingual programs at that time were simply a part of their daily instruction. Legislation passed in the 1870's ensured a place for women in rural classrooms when local districts across the US were required to provide educational opportunities for every child within a four mile walking distance of their home. This meant that the number of rural schools and teachers had to increase by a factor of 10. Superintendents made their rounds testing would-be teachers. Certificates of varying lengths were given to those who qualified and teacher contracts with specific rules and regulations were issued, although these contract stipulations rarely applied to a woman's teaching ability. Ten rules for the teacher, 1915, New York:

1. You will not marry during the term of your contract.
2. You are not to keep company with men.
3. You must be home between the hours of 8:00 pm and 6:00 a.m. unless attending a school function.
4. You may not loiter downtown in ice cream parlours.
5. You may not ride in a carriage or automobile, unless he is your brother or father.
6. You may not smoke cigarettes.
7. You may not dress in bright colours.
8. You may under no circumstances dye your hair.
9. You must wear at least 2 petticoats and your dress must not be any shorter than 2 inches above the ankle.

As states began to assess their needs for instructors, many districts found themselves woefully understaffed and without adequate buildings and facilities. Policies for granting certificates were sometimes stretched to the limits, or even ignored. Normal schools sprang up in conjunction with state universities and teachers' institutes were offered so students could obtain certification or re-apply for advance certificates. By the late 1880's, 63% of America's teachers were women in the cities and women held 90% of the teaching positions in rural classrooms. The agricultural depression in the 1890's kept women in rural schools, when school boards questioned the importance of paying higher salaries to men. In the early 1900's another student phenomenon was taking place in rural areas. Girls outnumbered boys in public high school attendance. On farms, boys were held back from attending school to assist the farm work and in cities. Boys were encouraged to leave school as quickly as possible to become wage earners. These two circumstances meant that girls and boys were finishing high school at a ratio of three to two.

This shift in the numbers of educated students resulted in the availability of more women for clerical and sales jobs and school teaching. Incidents of salary and contract discrimination were ever present. Male teachers in 1914 in Nebraska were paid $21.89 more per month than women. The average monthly salaries for teachers rose somewhat after World War I; however, men were still paid more than women. To avoid unnecessary expense, school boards regularly fired or failed to rehire experienced teachers and in this way could keep teachers' salaries low. As World War I drained the number of male teachers in the classrooms, the overall supply of rural teachers was barely meeting the demand. In America's one-room schools, women outnumbered their male counterparts by more than eight to one. Women were needed in administrative roles in school districts and many went on to become principals and superintendents. After the great depression in 1929, teachers' salaries plummeted once again and many teachers felt lucky to have a job or be making any money at all. During this era, the ratio of applicants for jobs was 32 to 1.

The great depression in 1929 was, however, a turning point when societal restrictions imposed working restrictions that stipulated that men should be the only employable wage earner in a household. Many women teachers holding administrative jobs or school classroom positions found themselves dismissed and replaced by a man. In later years a shift in numbers was experienced when men went to war and women again resumed the helm of America's rural schools during World War II. It was also during this time period that many districts relaxed their marriage clauses in teacher contracts.

From the very beginning their faces have haunted me, these rural women teachers gazing out of old photographs. Their faces stare boldly at the camera while a moment in time is frozen as the teacher, the schoolhouse, and a swarm of children are captured in brown half tones. Time and time again I sense that these teachers were even staring right at me, their eyes silently engaging mine. More often than not, I found it hard to look away. In photograph after photograph I began noticing that rarely, if ever, did the women teachers turn from the camera's view. Instead they seemed to capture the very heart of the lens, their expressions full faced, solemn and unflinching.

Women moved in and out of educational timelines, depending on land settlements, wars and economic situations. The American government moved forward to assist with rural education by establishing state universities in the 1860's that offered one form of assistance with normal school programs. Teachers were then trained among other things to work with larger, more diverse populations of children and communities, which proved to be a nearly opposite position from the early beginnings of the rural dame teacher. On one hand

educational history books rarely make mention of rural women teachers. Yet, this is Sarah Wanamacka, by the way, who did enormous policy rights for the Great Plains Indians. When she simply couldn't get work, she went back to teaching school again.

Yet, careful attention to a variety of materials and particularly local history materials has turned up an amazing amount of information about women teachers. Diaries, journals, letters and correspondence document rural women's work in rural teaching posts across the United States. My own research interests are in the areas of one-room schools today and the Amish classrooms so prevalent in my area of Pennsylvania. Relying on the one-room school model, the Amish still hold to rural education traditions. Stepping into an Amish classroom today is like stepping back in time 150 years, even seeing a horse and buggy hitched beside the building. Few things have changed for Amish schools, their educational goals, their facilities, their curriculum, or their teachers. Even today the female teacher is still the predominant educator for Amish children.

After conducting interviews with Amish teachers in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana and New York, I learned more about their classroom and the way they teach. The strength of the institution of education for the Amish is their ability to stay connected. This is done by mail, publications, Sunday gatherings, and word of mouth. For example, at the beginning of a new school year, a seasoned teacher serves as a mentor and offers advice to the newest members in the teaching community. In a session today, I will discuss in detail what I've learned from the literature about the Amish, their teachers, and their approach to education. I will also discuss some of the ironic similarities between what goes on a typical Amish class room and what is going on today in public schools.

Approximately 324 one-room schools still remain in the United States today. These teachers are now on the internet, and email, and have satellite dishes on their playgrounds. Their concerns are similar to those of their sister teachers almost 100 years ago. Their opportunities are even more similar because of the remoteness of their schools and the extra burdens placed upon rural teachers. Teachers in Montana still have remote school locations where they arrive in September and live in the teacherage during the entire school year, and leave in May. Some schools in Wyoming today also have programs for children and their parents who make the drive to school on Monday and attend extended hours during that week and leave on Thursday evening when they make the long drive home for a 3 day week-end.

What continues to be an important factor for women teachers today, staying on as rural school teachers, is simply a matter of autonomy for their school, their charges, their curricular issues, and discipline. It was as true 150 years ago as it is today. Autonomy seems to be the operative word. Kate Fullerton of Cherry County, Nebraska couldn't have stated it better when she was asked in 1985 what she liked about being a one-room school teacher. Her reply was this, "I like it here," she said, "I like being a teacher in a one-room school. I like driving the bus, doing the cooking, being the janitor, everything. I like the responsibility for the whole shebang."

The names of rural women teachers could fill many a teaching roster. During America's educational hay day, which lasted from the 1860's to the 1940's, one-room schools numbered well over 212,000 and approximately 85% of them were staffed with women teachers. It only seems fitting to conclude this talk by introducing you to some of the most interesting and unusual millennium teachers. They are delightful centenarians who were teachers at one time in their lives. They provide us with a grounding of how human teachers are, and their love for life and learning. First is Leila Denmark, born in 1898. When Leila's beau at the time was undecided about a career choice, she taught school for several years, hoping he would make up his mind. One of the teachers at her training college had provided her with dissecting instruments and she became fascinated with science and medicine. Thus began her long and lengthy history as a physician. When her husband died at the age of 91 she decided that she would continue seeing patients and has office hours, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday from 8:30 am to 3:00 pm. When asked if she has plans to retire, she says, "Nope, not until my obituary is in the newspaper. It would drive me crazy if I had nothing to do."

Next is Lois Addey, who was born in 1892 and met her prince charming at a Sunday school picnic. Before she was allowed to marry, her parents insisted that she get a college education. It was something that literally saved her life. When their first child was only 2 years old, a flu epidemic took their little girl and within 6 months her husband was dead as well. Teaching literally got her through the next 10 years and she went on to become a principal. One day, she suddenly received a type written letter from a local banker who was widowed. It said, "would I please correspond with him? Well, I didn't even read that letter for a second. I pitched it in the fire. I wouldn't correspond with Sam or any other man, because I could never love anyone as much as I loved my first husband, Marvin." Fortunately, Lois's mother intervened and out of that initial letter came a new life and a career when she was able to open an art school for children, a long-time dream of hers.

Finally, we come to Hilda and Lena Vangsted, side by side through the years, born in 1901. Except for a seven year separation early in their career as college teachers, identical twins Hilda and Lena spent virtually every day of their lives together. They were identical in every way. Their hairdos, their smiles, their purple outfits, their earrings, their brooches. They were natural teachers. They went on to become college teachers and taught education and psychology and the social sciences. There is one small part that is kind of fun. "I feel sorry for people who don't have a twin," says Lena, "It must be very strange," says Hilda, "People embrace the

Vangsted twins as their own, but now they stare at us even more because we're a couple of old ladies coming along, and they always want to know what the difference is. They say, surely there must be something they disagree about." "Oh I know," says Lena, "she likes Promise margarine," and "Oh, she likes Fleischmann's," says Hilda. "But I'll make the sandwiches and I'll use Fleischmann's on hers sometimes," says Lena, "and she doesn't notice." "I do," says Hilda.

I think about how lucky I've been to study rural women teachers. I feel so often that I met and developed friendships with so many of the women through their diaries and journals. They were a sturdy lot, full of spunk and determination. Their commitment to learning and children never faltered. I believe rural women teachers, their voices, and the body of literature and information that surrounds them are a valuable resource for educators and historians interested in building a new and more enlightened educational history of the United States. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to introduce you to some of the most interesting, funny, sincere, intelligent, and spunky women in America's historical past.